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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002616

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: REFERENDUM UPDATE, 6:00 P.M., AUGUST 15

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor for
Reason 1.4(d)

Summary

1. (C) National Electoral Council (CNE) director Jorge Rodriguez announced at 1:30 p.m. that polling hours have officially been extended until 8 p.m.; persons still in line at the time would be allowed to vote. CNE directors Francisco Carrasquero and Rodriguez told reporters they obtained a CD with Carrasquero's voice falsely announcing the recall of President Hugo Chavez, and asked for an investigation. (The recording has been aired several times in the past week on a humorous radio program). Carter Center representatives briefing Codel Weller reported voting centers opening late, long delays in voting, and dramatically different levels of organization at the different voting centers. The Carter Center expects voting to continue until 4 a.m. August 16, but they also expect initial results to be announced around 8-9 p.m. to keep tensions from rising. End Summary.

Long Delays Cause Extended Hours

2. (U) National Electoral Council (CNE) director Jorge Rodriguez announced at 1:30 p.m. that polling hours have officially been extended until 8 p.m. Persons still in line at the official closing time would still be allowed to vote. Citing delays with fingerprint machines, Rodriguez said voters could vote first and then register their fingerprints. Rodriguez said the CNE had directed the military to reorient lines directly to each voting table.

CNE Launched Investigation of False Voice Recording

3. (U) CNE directors Francisco Carrasquero and Rodriguez told reporters they had obtained a CD with Carrasquero's voice falsely announcing the recall of President Hugo Chavez. According to Carrasquero, the voice recording was to be played in a national broadcast on all radio and television (cadena) at 8 p.m. to cause chaos. He announced an immediate investigation would be launched to uncover the perpetrator/s and apprehend him/them. The recording, apparently, is the work of reporter Fausto Malave who has broadcast the same recording for the past week on a humorous Caracas radio station program. Causa R deputy Andres Velasquez, speaking from the opposition headquarters, called the Carrasquero/Rodriguez accusation "infantile."

Embassy Officials and CODEL Observe

4. (C) Embassies and Codel Weller acting as informal observers found:

-- most centers opened late (average delay time 1 hour and a half);

--voter turnout overwhelmed machine capacity leading to 6-8 hour delays in voting and a voting time of 4-10 minute per voter rather than the one minute lapse foreseen by the CNE;

--many centers received fewer machines (voting and fingerprint) than they were promised and several machines were reported damaged;

--fingerprint machine problems were the worst culprits for additional delays; and

--voters appear to be waiting to vote patiently despite long delays, but tensions are mounting in the afternoon as delays become longer.

15. (C) Lack of fingerprint machines or voting table workers caused delays in opening voting centers. In some locations in Caracas, National Guard officers drafted the first few voters in line to work the election tables. The voting process was slow in all voting centers, but some were better organized than others. At a voting center with 9 voting machines in Caracas, only 22 people voted in 10 minutes around 10:30 am (average 4 minutes per voter). At centers in Valencia, Maracay, and Caracas, some centers were organized in lines by cedula number, but still experienced long delays. In a center in Maracay, Aragua State, a broken voting machine resulted in voters being turned away and told to return later. At 2:35 p.m., the machine had not been fixed and no one at that particular table had voted. In Maracaibo, Emboffs found fingerprint machines worked sporadically. Some centers allowed the voting to continue without the fingerprints while others halted the process until repairs were made. Various reports from Caracas, Maracaibo, Valencia and Maracay indicated one out of three voting and fingerprint machines were not delivered or not working per voting center.

Carter Center Observations

16. (C) Codel Weller observers met with representatives of the Carter Center who reported voting centers opening late, long delays in voting, and dramatically different levels of organization at the different voting centers. The Carter Center expects voting to continue until 4 a.m. August 16, but they also expect initial results to be announced around 8-9 p.m. to keep tensions from rising. Carter Center calculations indicate 5,000 people are voting per minute throughout the country, meaning that 4.1 million of the 14 million voters registered will be able to vote in 10 hours.

17. (C) The Carter Center expects the quick count to be a "long slow count." Voters are being allowed to vote at machines they are not assigned to and one ballot deposit box is being used per voting center rather than per machine. For the Carter Center, this will make the quick count process very slow as they will have to resort all ballots according to imprinted codes. The Carter Center representative said they expect up to 85% turnout.

The Famous Vote

18. (U) President Hugo Chavez voted a little after noon in Caracas in Caracas. He reiterated his pledge to respect whatever result was presented by the CNE and urged the opposition to do the same. Vice-President Jose Vicente Rangel voted shortly after mid-day in Caracas. Rangel said, "The true heroes are the Venezuelan people who have turned out in mass and are stoically waiting in long lines to exercise their right to vote." Rangel said that technical difficulties should not take precedence over the will of the people. He said he agreed with temporarily discarding the use of fingerprint machines if it made the process quicker. Jailed Baruta mayor Henrique Capriles Radonski voted at the headquarters of the Intelligence Police in Caracas shortly before 2 p.m. Other prisoners from the same prison were also allowed to vote. The president of the Catholic Venezuelan Conference of Bishops Archbishop Baltazar Porras voted before noon in the Andean city of Merida. He praised the civic and peaceful attitude of the Venezuelan voters saying, "The massive participation generates a greater consensus for a future of inclusion, brotherhood and unity."

Violence

19. (C) A young woman wounded by a National Guard's randomly fired gunshot in the morning of August 15 at a voting center in eastern Caracas died on the way to the hospital, according to press reports. In the same part of town, pro-Chavez gangs later reportedly fired shots and tear gas at a voting center. The Carter Center reported the incident resulted in the closing of the voting center where some 12,000 people were to vote.

Coordinadora Democratica Outlook

110. (C) Coordinadora Democratica representatives told PolOff that about four million voters had voted as of 4:00 p.m. Exit polls conducted by the Coordinadora in various states showed the opposition leading by wide margins in the Zulia, Caracas, and Miranda. Despite their projected lead, Coordinadora representatives worried that the number of

voters would be insufficient to guarantee the threshold of 3.7 million and intended to ask the CNE to extend voting hours to 11:00 p.m. Coordinadora representatives were working to bring water and food to those in line, some of whom had been waiting for more than ten hours. Electoral chief Amado Dounia said seven people had been detained around Venezuela for conducting exit polls, though he was not sure whether the people continued in custody.

Coordinadora Democratica Outlines Possibilities for Fraud

11. (C) An opposition advisor gave Carter Center and Organization of American States (OAS) observers an August 14 outline of existing and possible irregularities in the referendum process related to actions taken by the National Electoral Council (CNE) to manipulate the vote. According to the opposition, there are five main problems in the process: 1) the permanent electoral registry, 2) the fingerprinting machines, 3) the administration of electoral bodies, 4) last-minute decisions by the CNE, and 5) Plan Republica.

12. (C) The opposition faults the CNE for closing the national registry July 10, which was not 60 days before the electoral event as called for in the Organic Electoral Law, and for not publishing the registry in a timely manner. The opposition also criticizes the CNE for irregularities in the assignment of voting centers for various individuals and for leaving some voters off the registry altogether. As for the fingerprinting machines, the opposition notes that there is no oversight of the technology of the machines, and they could easily produce "false matches" to disenfranchise potential voters. The opposition continues to question the secrecy of the vote with the fingerprinting machines and also notes that the Organic Electoral Law only allows for the use of a Venezuelan identification card (la cedula) to identify a voter.

13. (C) In addition to the government's control over the CNE, pro-government entities control everything from the regional CNE offices to the electoral tables. Last minute decisions by the CNE - regarding additional tables, manual voting cards, and additional "blank" voting books for military personnel - could also affect the vote in favor of the government. Finally, the opposition claims that under the current Plan Republica, the CNE has given military personnel functions that should normally fall to civilian administrators.
Shapiro